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COOPERATIVE LEARNING

What is Cooperative Learning?

Cooperative learning is a way of organizing classroom activities, in order to maximize achievement and positive social relationships. It depends upon small groups, usually with a mix of gender, ability, and ethnicity/race.

In a cooperatively structured classroom, students have a specific task, an assignment, or a project which may go on for one lesson or for many weeks. For the duration, the group remains together, and its members are responsible to each other. The teacher carefully monitors the work of the groups and is available for assistance. Some work may be done individually, some in pairs, and some in homogeneous ability groups; but at many points the "home" group or team comes together for discussion and for peer teaching.

In cooperative learning groups, each student has an equally important role to play, and peer teaching/tutoring is an essential part of the system. The success of the group in accomplishing its task is equally dependent on every member's contribution. Students work for their own success and that of their peers.

At the end of the assignment, the teacher rewards the group based on group members' individual learning. For example, the assignment may have resulted in the production of a booklet with five chapters, each done by one student in the team, with assistance from his/her peers. The teacher may give an individual mark for each chapter, and a number of bonus points to every member if all chapters received a satisfactory mark.

In cooperative learning, teachers are planners, facilitators, observers, catalysts, and evaluators. They plan the grouping of students, explain tasks, teach social skills, provide materials, and schedule time. Their opportunities to observe and understand the learning process in their students and to help out where they are most needed increase as the necessity of simultaneously directing and monitoring all students decreases.

There are several techniques for implementing a cooperative learning environment. All, whether structured, like "jigsaw", or open-ended, like "group investigation", include considerable peer teaching and interaction in small, heterogeneous groups, as well as a shared reward. And all have been found to be very effective in increasing learning and in increasing intergroup friendships.

According to the new French as a second language/OAC guidelines, the benefits of small group work include:

* increased student-initiated communication;
* greater assurance to students who are hesitant to participate in whole-class activities;
* the development of student skills in organizing a task and in working together to complete it;
* increased sense of personal responsibility for their own learning among students.

Cooperative learning is an appropriate way of structuring curriculum in any subject area, and at any grade or level. It teaches students the collaborative skills essential for effective group work. (It should not be confused with cooperative education, which refers to work/study programs in secondary schools.)

Cooperative Learning and Achievement

In the 25 studies (including one in Toronto) which have compared small, mixed ability groups with a group incentive/reward to more traditional classroom organization, including homogeneous ability groups, 22 found that students in the cooperative learning situation made greater academic gains.

One of the keys to this success is the fact that students are active. They are teaching each other and talking about the material. People remember better when they have been active in obtaining and presenting information.

Cooperative learning and Social Relationships

Attempts to increase inter-ethnic friendship which are based on special training for teachers, or special human relations texts or curricula are ineffective. The only effective means for decreasing social distance are those which bring students into direct interaction with each other, participating together in class and in extracurricular activities. In most cases studied, cooperative learning, which is based on close, positive contact in ethnically/racially mixed teams, results in increased in interethnic friendship.

Cooperative Learning, Mixed Ability Grouping, and Mainstreaming

Most teachers in elementary schools use ability grouping some of the time, especially in language arts and mathematics. Teachers group children who are at a similar level of achievement and give each group member the same assignment. While this is administratively convenient, many educators are concerned that homogeneous grouping by ability may, over time, widen the academic and social gap between high and low achievers, as students miss the opportunity to interact with peers who can serve as models.

Cooperative learning groups often include one slow learner, two or three average learners, and one fast learner. The slow learners have often been students who had been segregated part of the day for special help from a resource teacher. Practitioners of cooperative learning have reported a high degree of success, with the slower learners gaining in academic proficiency and self-confidence, without impeding the progress of the faster learners.

A frequent concomittant of cooperative learning and mainstreaming is a change in the role of the resource or special educator or ESL/D teacher.

> Special educators in this project worked more closely with classroom teachers and spent more time in classrooms than they had previously. At times they worked directly with students other than handicapped students, sometimes in group settings that included the handicapped child. The result was . . . to make special educators less separate from the ongoing regular school program than they have been in the past. They . . . become a more integral part of their students' total education environment. (M. Hoben, Towards integration in the mainstream, Exceptional Children 47(2),p.104, 1980)

Cooperative Learning and Minority Groups

In addition to powerful positive effects on social integration in the classroom, cooperative learning techniques have an additional advantage for students from particular cultural minorities. Because many traditional cultures emphasize community and cooperation more and individualism and competition less than does our urban North American culture, children from such traditional backgrounds are disadvantaged in the classroom, where individualistic, competitive behavior ("who can get the answer first?") is emphasized. Thus, studies have shown that Native children perform better in a small group, cooperative situation than in the traditional classroom.

Relevance to Ministry of Education Guidelines

The most recently released Ministry guidelines, such as the FSL/OAC cited above, place very strong emphasis on the desirability of small-group work, cooperative interaction, and student-centred learning, all basic components of cooperative learning:

* Shared Discovery: Teaching and Learning in the Primary Years includes a section on "Working in a Group".
* The longest section in Ages 9 through 12: a resource book for teachers is devoted to small groups.
* At the secondary level, Basically Right says:

> Small-group and individual activities complement teacher-led instruction . . . Respect for one another is encouraged by projects which cultivate initiative, self-discipline, and co-operative interaction. (p. 6)

Further Information

Numerous books and articles on cooperative learning are available through the Education Centre Library (591-8183). A local network of educators interested in and using cooperative learning techniques in the classroom is called the Great Lakes chapter of The International Association for the Study of Cooperative Education (IASCE). The present chairperson is Judy Clarke (759-7740).

Within the Toronto Board, many members of IASCE have expertise in cooperative learning, and can be called upon for support and advice. These include:

Susan Eadie (Psychoeducational Consultant, East Area Office: 461-9284)
Joan Green (Superintendent, Central and Secondary Area Office: 368-1052)
Noreen Hardwick (Coordinator, Inner City/ABC: 591-8361)
John Myers (Consultant, Social Studies; on leave in 1986/87)
Kemp Rickett (Principal, Howard Public School: 535-2165)
Suzanne Ziegler (Manager, Research Services: 591-8287)

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